



Kashmir as fragments of my diary

DOI:

[10.1515/9781805397618-012](https://doi.org/10.1515/9781805397618-012)

Document Version

Final published version

[Link to publication record in Manchester Research Explorer](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Aijazi, O. (2024). Kashmir as fragments of my diary. In N. Choudhury , & A. Schmeding (Eds.), *Frontier Ethnographies: Deconstructing Research Experiences in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (pp. 219-236). Berghahn Books. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781805397618-012>

Published in:

Frontier Ethnographies

Citing this paper

Please note that where the full-text provided on Manchester Research Explorer is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Proof version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Explorer are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Takedown policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please refer to the University of Manchester's Takedown Procedures [<http://man.ac.uk/04Y6Bo>] or contact openresearch@manchester.ac.uk providing relevant details, so we can investigate your claim.



KASHMIR AS FRAGMENTS OF MY DIARY

Omer Aijazi

Introduction

How does one think the fragment?
By making room for rupture . . .
—Dan Mellamphy¹

How is it possible to render knowable
the fragments of experiences?
—Richard Rechtman²

The disputed territory of Kashmir remains subject to the organizing imaginations of encroaching nation-states. Imagined as a cultural and geopolitical periphery in imperial gazetteers—a frontier region and border zone of sorts—occupation and coloniality in Kashmir are intertwined with pressures to prevent Kashmir from becoming any other kind of political space.³ While many compelling writings have emerged on Kashmir—often crafted with egalitarian intentions—they give in too easily to the straightening and homogenizing demands of disciplinary and imperial knowledge production.⁴ This prompts the following question: *Can we even speak of a decolonized Kashmir when the arrangements of our very articulations remain . . . so colonial?*

To dislodge Kashmir from its colonial fixity, risks must be taken “in the way we listen, think, speak, and write about Kashmir.”⁵ Otherwise our efforts at decolonial world-building will remain incomplete and impoverished. Continuing with this line of thought, I attempt to articulate Kashmir outside of its placement at the geopolitical edges of empire. To do so, I revisit

“fragments” from my diaries that I maintained during research in the mountainous Neelum Valley, Pakistan-administered Kashmir, between 2014 and 2022. I approach these fragments as overlaps between aesthetics and analysis, politics and ethics, theory and methodology, as opposed to simply data, field notes, or ethnography.

What are fragments? Fragmentary writing has been widely used in literature and philosophy as an aesthetic and redemptive device. One could call a fragment “a chaos of everything sublime, beautiful, and charming.”⁶ They are aesthetic propositions. Fragments are self-contained, their essence carries infinite definitions and opens up the possibilities of multiple external relationships.⁷ The fragment is a text in its own right that needs not obey a “will to completion,” and therefore enjoys “the status of *being*, existing independent of formal constraint.”⁸ As both concept and form, fragments are “at once philosophical and literary,” expressions of both a “philosophical limit and its surpassing, in a form made new by its self-conscious theoretical investiture.”⁹ Fragments are inconclusive yet generative, and carry symbolic weight. They present openings to sidestep the foreclosures of concepts and our desires for coherence. A fragmentary approach to writing and thinking is also presented as a form of disruption that allows knowing and “experiencing the presence or aliveness of the other.”¹⁰

What “work” do fragments do? As an incomplete totality, in their brevity, fragments can reveal the unwritten, disclosing and enclosing what is absent. They bear absent voices and traces and allude to a whole.¹¹ In their analytical indeterminacy and haptic convergence, fragments offer the potential to dismantle binaries such as those of fieldwork/homework, theory/experience, researcher/researched, and knowledge bearer/producer. Fragments can challenge tautological and teleological thinking and disrupt the temporality and sequence of evidence building and theory generation. They offer alternate sequencing and elliptical narratives. They are an evocation to break asunder a stitched-together impression of a whole, not possible through linear writing.

The fragments presented in this chapter are marked by Urdu numerals (Urdu being one of the languages of interaction with my interlocutors).¹² The numbering is not sequential; but rep-

resents a symbolic gesture to disrupt chronology. Through these fragments, I attempt to convey the multiple ways Kashmir is constituted and reconstituted within the very relationships and ethical decisions enacted in the “field” and how the social is imagined and related in these encounters. The fragments elaborate the researcher as a body out of place, suspended in epistemological plurality, diversity, and difference, and bring to the forefront the unsureness and ambiguities that linger long after the “field” has been exited. They help us see that regardless of an ethical decision-making framework rooted within a calculus of reciprocity, empathy, or self-awareness, field research, like any other form of social interventionism, is an intrusive and disruptive practice. Hence, there can be no “perfect” entry or exit. Centering these concerns, the fragments gesture toward an opening up of Kashmir from a fixed entity wedged between the high geopolitics of India, Pakistan, and China to an interstitial and relational terrain where the failures, small victories, and confusions of encounter take primacy. They provide a glimpse of what persists when empire is bracketed. The fragments direct attention to the flows and ebbs of life that unfold nonetheless as expressed in dedications to each other, such as the care taken to prepare a meal or time made for a guest. The wayfaring and iterant text takes up the frontier in multiple senses: geographic positioning of Kashmir as a frontier/border area, the boundary of writing, and boundaries in terms of research positionality.

۱۳۲

On October 8, 2005, at 8:52 A.M. local time, an earthquake (magnitude 7.7 on the Richter scale) struck the portion of Kashmir under Pakistan’s control. An estimated 100,000 people died in the earthquake, some 138,000 were injured, and another 3.5 million displaced.

Strong tremors were felt as far as Islamabad (Pakistan’s capital)—the city I call home.

Just a few months earlier, I had started university in Toronto and was still managing my transition to Canada. As I was reading through a textbook and preparing for class, the phone rang. It was my dad trying to explain what had just happened. The

reception was poor, and his voice drifted in and out. I couldn't quite grasp the enormity of the event at the time—sure it was an earthquake, but we had them frequently in Islamabad.

A few moments later, the phone rang again, this time it was my mother. She described how the house swayed from side to side and everyone was out on the streets. She paused for a moment, and then revealed: "Margalla Towers have collapsed. We can hear people scream for help from under the rubble."

Margalla Towers was a residential apartment complex, Islamabad's first luxury high rise. The towers were set to mark the city's shift toward vertical living. Above all, it was considered a safe place to call home.

I hated the towers, because they blocked the view of the mountains. From the rooftop of my parents' home, once you could scope out the entire city, the surrounding hills . . . now all you saw was concrete.

Numerous people died as the building collapsed, and hundreds were injured as they ate breakfast, getting ready for the day ahead.

As the deceased were identified, their bodies were eventually removed from under the rubble and buried according to Islamic customs. But the event persisted, almost lingered in perpetuity. This was so close to home, right at home, there was no place to run away to. Those under the rubble and those affected were all familiar faces. People you would go to school with, spot in the marketplace, or visit in their homes.

Eventually, the rubble was cleared, the bodies buried, but the carcasses of the towers were allowed to stand. Boy, did they stand. Every time you would cross the space—to go to the store, fill up on gas—they were there as constant reminders, as unintentional monuments.

It was some eight years later when the city government finally authorized the taking down of the building—or whatever remained of it. Now it is the site of a new high rise. A mosque was set up nearby to remind everyone of Allah.

My journey to Kashmir began even before I got there.

Doctor at the travel clinic in Vancouver, Canada:

“Oh jeez, I don’t know where to begin. Pakistan is at high risk for everything!”

“Where will you be in Pakistan? Oh, wait, can you say those names slowly? Oh wait, can you show them to me on the map?”

“Surprisingly, your field sites are not at risk of malaria.”

“Remember, don’t pet animals there the way you do so in Canada.”

An international health insurance provider:

“When I saw where you are going, I didn’t even look at the regular coverage options!”

“Other insurances will let you go to Pakistan, but if something happens to you there, say by bomb, terrorism, or violence they will not cover you.”

“Our firm is currently writing policies for Pakistan. But I can’t promise you anything, the world can change over the next few days, and they may deny coverage to Pakistan. Let me request them for a possible offer.”

Advisor at the university’s Safety Abroad Office:

“I am pleased with your security plan, and I know you have a lot of experience in the country. However, I have one query. How do you plan to evacuate if required? I know you wrote that if things become unstable in your field sites, you will evacuate to Islamabad, the capital city. But Islamabad itself is a high-risk area. How will you get out of there?”

Awards Officer at the funding agency:

“You must provide us with a security plan before we release your grant.”

“Please courier back to me these signed documents from Pakistan since they may never get here by regular mail.”

My university colleagues:

“Stay safe! Are you worried about having a constant upset stomach?”

“Don’t run into Islamic Jihadists and fundamentalists!”

“Does Pakistan border with Iraq? Don’t go near Iraq!”

“You must be so brave to go there!”

On the first meeting with my host organization in Kashmir, its director, a middle-aged man of Kashmiri origin, narrated a story:

In the early 1990s, I was traveling on a bus in the Neelum Valley coming in from Muzaffarabad [capital of Pakistan-administered Kashmir], I noticed an interesting-looking man. He looked half Pakistani but with a foreign touch. I started conversing with him as I got off the bus since he appeared a little lost. He turned out to be a researcher from a university in Montana, or was it Minnesota? He was studying a very special bird, which is only found in Neelum. Several years later, after his studies were published, that particular bird was categorized as endangered and placed on the conservation list as a protected species. You see, I am convinced research can produce action. What will you do for the people you will be researching?

۵۵

Abrar (A): You are out of ghee,¹³ give me some money and I can go get some.

Omer (O): Wow, what did you do with the last liter of oil we bought only a week ago?

A: A liter a week is a lot of mileage; we use that much ghee for just three meals in our family!

O: Hmmm, when I am at home, a bottle of oil lasts me several weeks.

A: Well, here people use ghee to flavor their dishes. Not everyone can afford tomatoes and onions to add taste to food.

O: But ghee or oil costs way more than tomatoes and onions?

A (raising his voice a little): It's not just about the cost. People don't always have the luxury to hike down to the bazar. Also, as you may have noticed by now, the vegetable shops here often don't carry any tomatoes or onions for days, they are trucked in from Pakistan. There is no coriander or mint or garlic or ginger anywhere, have you seen any? We use ghee to add color and flavor to our dishes, to make food enjoyable. *Now do you want ghee or not?*

۳۳

While I undoubtedly held the balance of power in my favor, Abrar, the caretaker of the local guesthouse where I stayed, often went out of his way to maintain influence and scrutiny over



Figure 9.1. Trout fish caught from the Neelum River is being deep-fried in ghee. It is “illegal” to fish the Neelum River, and through its Fisheries Department, the Pakistani state levies heavy fines on those who break this rule, 2014. © Omer Aijazi.

me. For example, he would maintain a close watch on me. He was very concerned about whether I drank alcohol and would regularly sweep my room for any empty bottles whenever he had the chance (there were none, obviously).¹⁴ One day, I used a cheap cologne as an air freshener. It had a strong smell of alcohol. Abrar rushed into my room, bewildered, sniffing the air. “I can smell a strange smell,” he said. He then spent the next five minutes going through my things until he found the perfume bottle. I asked him if he wanted it. He refused, saying it was a terribly pungent smell.

Abrar often expressed sadness, usually in public settings to devalue my standing, that I was not married and therefore without a family. My lack of physical fitness was also of interest to him. One year, when I had gained weight, he shook his head in disapproval: “Omer bhai [brother], what have you done to yourself?”

۱۵

My research assistant, Shehzad, accompanied me on one of my trips to Muzaffarabad. Shehzad calls the Neelum Valley home. En route, he confided:

About fifteen years ago, a man just like you came to Neelum. He had business cards and claimed he was affiliated with Human Rights Watch in Islamabad. Like you, he said he wants to do research. Every morning, he would attend various schools to lecture on human rights during assembly time. He stayed in the same guesthouse as you did, even in the same room. He stayed for about two months. Once, he told me he was going to Athmuquam [another section of the valley], said goodbye to me, and got on the bus. I decided to keep an eye on him and continued walking after the bus. Sure enough, I saw him get off the bus at the next stop and take another back [in the opposite direction]. Then I saw him trek up the mountain. Later, it turned out that he worked for the agencies [Pakistani intelligence organizations that surveil the region]. He was covertly leading the investigation of a murder in our village. When he checked out of the guesthouse, he left a long letter in the cupboard directed at the caretaker. It stated that he was really there for the murder investigation. Shortly after, some men were arrested in Neelum. Omer bhai, are you also a spy for the agencies?

A

These mountain pathways are so lonely.

They are also so narrow.

One is forced to bump into each passerby.

Regardless of how fleeting the contact is, a certain kind of intimacy is forged in these very brushings of bodies or clothing.

This may be expressed as a greeting, "*Asslam Alikum*," or a polite nod, or a shrinking of one's body to make room for the other.

On these trails, you must be mindful of the minutest details: where you place your foot, which rocks are loose, which will support your weight—the mountains demand thoughtfulness and dedication.



Figure 9.2. A lonely mountain pathway (photograph taken by Rafi Butt), 2014. © Omer Aijazi.

۸۹

Fawad: In Rawalpindi [a city in Pakistan], everyone thinks I walk way too fast! My friends in college can't keep up with me! I am used to walking fast because when I am in Neelum, the distances are so vast that I have to zoom from one place to another. There is no time to walk slowly in Kashmir.

۱۰

I was concerned that our Jeep didn't have seatbelts. Many drivers purposefully yank them out of their cars out of annoyance; some leave them in never to be touched.

On these narrow roads, collision with another vehicle is not the biggest of concerns. A more pressing issue is that the vehicle may be forced off the mountain altogether by rain or a landslide. "Then you have to think fast and save your life by jumping out of the car before it plunges into the ravine," the driver joked.

۱۱۱

You walk like a foreigner, just like the ones who came to our village after the *zilzalah* [earthquake]. They came in droves after the *zilzalah*. Like you, they too were unable to walk straight [walk with integrity] on these slopes; they would stumble from left to right.

۱۲

The Line of Control (LoC) cuts right through Neelum, dividing it into India and Pakistan. While the border constrains all movement, the Neelum River remains defiant, crisscrossing between Pakistan and India in its ebbs and flows.

I am also mindful of the other kinds of borders and barriers that I may have inadvertently erected as I complete my research in Neelum, and how those around me have sought to transcend them.

My host (*baba*) in Neelum laughed at the self-seriousness of the bottled water that I purchased in Muzaffarabad: “Look



Figure 9.3. The Neelum Valley remains littered with the logos of various NGOs, humanitarian organizations, and foreign governments, 2015. © Omer Aijazi.



Figure 9.4. On one side of the river is Pakistan-administered Kashmir, and on the other, India-administered Kashmir, 2015. © Omer Aijazi.

around you, you are surrounded by crystalline water. Nestlé probably fills those [bottles] from here.”

On my first night in Neelum, *baba* prepared for me a large plate of steamed rice and lentils. I ate maybe half of it, it was way too much food. *Baba* was astonished: “Men here typically eat twice as much as this plate.” His nephew, Ali, chipped in: “You eat like a child, how come you are so overweight?”

۱۳

One evening, Abrar knocked on my door in the guesthouse. He wanted to borrow my nail clippers. What an odd request.

۳۳۳

People would often slip small gifts into my backpack: giant cucumbers, the occasional corn, grapes. Perhaps they feel sympathy for me: a sense of sadness at my loneliness and lack of emplacement in a new place. Or are these attempts at border crossing?



Figure 9.5. Gifts of sympathy or attempts at border crossing? 2015. © Omer Aijazi.

١٥

Ali chased the spider out of my bathroom. He giggled uncontrollably at my “irrational” fear: “You are so large, the spider so tiny, what is the problem?”

۱۱۳

There is very little electricity in this village. The power only comes on after 7 P.M. As soon as it does, I quickly charge my laptop, phone, and camera and use the printer as needed.

Today, Asfar came to my room:

We have noticed that from 7 P.M. to 7:30 P.M. every day, all the village lights go on and off, they flicker, as if all the light bulbs were candles whose flames waver with the wind. What do you do at this time?

We decided to experiment. I plugged in each of my electronics, and Asfar rushed home to see what effect each device had on the voltage. It didn't take us long to find the main culprit: the printer. Each time I turned it on, the lights in Asfar's home dimmed, flickered, wavered.

My printer annoys residents, interrupts their dinners and television shows. I am not the only one who waits for the power to come back on.

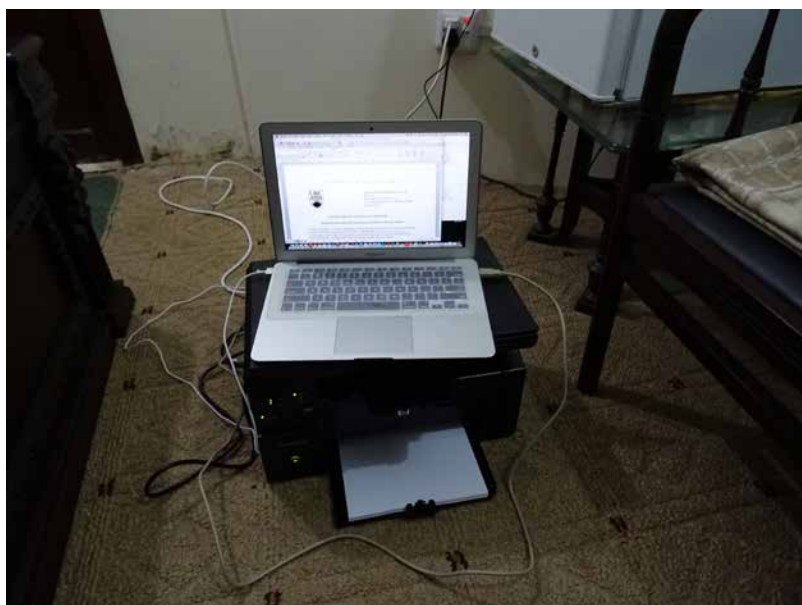


Figure 9.6. The printer turns lightbulbs into candles, 2014. © Omer Aijazi.

۳۳

Currently, it is harvesting season. Men are busy collecting maize, grass, and other vegetables. It is almost October; just another month, and winter will set in. The women and children have just begun to come down from the *malis*.¹⁵

Life is in flux. These are times of transition. I have decided to compensate my interlocutors for taking off from their busy routines to spend time with me. They are very surprised at being “paid” for their “time.” It has taken some negotiation to adequately explain my decision to pay people for their time.

I am now beginning to reconsider my decision to do so. In a certain sense, I have monetized time, objectified it, and put a price on an innate characteristic of rural mountain life: the generosity to make time for others.

۱۸

Meet Nusrat, my research assistant. Out of respect, we (myself and the other male research assistants) call her “Madam.”



Figure 9.7. Madam, 2014. © Omer Aijazi.

Madam is a firecracker. She is the risk-taker of our team. She is an excellent interviewer, very observant, and calls out our mistakes without any hesitation.

One of our photovoice participants is a young girl in her twenties who cannot read or write and has never used a camera. My team is worried that she will be unable to correctly perform the assigned task. I told them to let her try, and something valuable will come out of her efforts nonetheless. I am sure she will also be a firecracker.

۲۰

Chicken Karahi (recipe shared by Dilpazeer, who worked as a cook for many years in the city before returning to Neelum)

Ingredients:

1.5 kilograms chicken	Garlic
2 <i>pao</i> ¹⁶ ghee	Salt
1 <i>pao</i> onion	Red chilli
1 <i>pao</i> tomatoes	Black pepper



Figure 9.8. Chicken karahi, 2015. © Omer Aijazi.

Method:

First slaughter the chicken and pluck its feathers and skin. Then cut the chicken into twelve pieces and thoroughly wash them. Put some ghee in a large *daichki* (pot) and brown the chicken, a few pieces at a time. Remove the chicken and add more ghee. When the ghee is heated up, add the onions and brown them. Then add the garlic. When the garlic is aromatic, add the tomatoes and give everything a good stir. When the tomatoes are roasted, add the salt, black pepper, and red chilli powder followed by the chicken. Stir the chicken occasionally and add splashes of water as needed. When the gravy becomes a deep red color and oil has risen to the top, the chicken karahi is ready.

Conclusion

I have attempted to articulate Neelum (and by extension Kashmir) via fragments of diaries that I maintained during my time there. When read together or apart, these fragments tease out the multiple and plural ways Kashmir is constructed within the very relationships and ethical decisions that are enacted in the “field.” The fragments provide clues on how *else* to imagine the world. They demonstrate how life is made one’s own such as through the hastening of one’s walk in hostile surroundings or dispelling the false security provided by a vehicle’s seatbelts when both landscape and infrastructure are neglected and left to deteriorate.

In their open-endedness and abruptness, the fragments subtly hint at other possibilities beyond a static territorial reading. They offer Kashmir as a relational space and invite the reader to dwell in the unevenness of life therein to consider that there may be other starting points than the realisms of empirical wayfinding. In their incomplete completeness, the fragments encourage the reader to pause at questions of adjudication: *Who makes the decisions on what counts as knowledge, and why?*

Omer Aijazi is a lecturer (assistant professor) at the Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute, University of Manchester. A decolonial ethnographer of borderland South Asia, he

is interested in how people imagine and claim their worlds in the wake of colonial rule and environmental ruin while in the shadows of empire. Omer is the author of *Atmospheric Violence: Disaster and Repair in Kashmir* (University of Pennsylvania Press, contemporary ethnography series).

Notes

1. Mellamphy 1998: 83–98.
2. Rechtman 2017: 3.
3. Bouzas 2019: 88–118.
4. There are notable exceptions. For example, see the writings of Uzma Falak, e.g., Falak 2023: 69–85; Falak 2020: 109–15; Falak 2018: 154–55.
5. Aijazi 2020: 33.
6. Friedrich Schlegel, quoted in Tanehisa 2009: 60.
7. Tanehisa 2009: 59–68.
8. Elias 2004: 2.
9. Sandford 2016: 25.
10. Lisa Stevenson, quoted in Holsgens 2020.
11. See Adorno 1997; Hill 2012.
12. Urdu is the national language of Pakistan; it is the language of power. Most residents of the Neelum Valley speak Pahari. We conversed in both, but I am not fluent in Pahari, and people would often switch to Urdu upon sensing this. This posed its own ethical challenges and dilemmas.
13. Ghee = clarified butter.
14. Alcohol is forbidden in this context and along with one's marital status is an indicator of one's modesty, integrity, and character. This in turn informs an outsider's suitability for circulating in the community.
15. *Malis* are transient spaces at higher elevations that allow easy access to grazing pastures. Women and children typically migrate to the *malis* during summer with their livestock.
16. A local unit of measure.

References

- Adorno, Theodor W. 1997. *Aesthetic Theory*. London: A & C Black.
- Aijazi, Omer. 2018. "Kashmir as Movement and Multitude." *Journal of Narrative Politics* 4(2): 88–118.
- . 2020. "What about Insaniyat? Morality and Ethics in the Pahars of Kashmir." *Himalaya* 40(1): 30–48.
- Bouzas, Antía Mato. 2019. *Kashmir as a Borderland: The Politics of Space and Belonging across the Line of Control*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

- Elias, Camelia. 2004. *The Fragment: Towards a History and Poetics of a Performative Genre*. Bern: Peter Lang.
- Falak, Uzma. 2018. "Point of Departure." *Anthropology and Humanism* 43(1): 154–55.
- . 2020. "On Elsewhereness: Notes from the Road, 2016." *Himalaya* 40(1): 109–15.
- . 2023. "Resisting the Clockwork of Occupation: Thinking through Ruptures." *English Language Notes* 61(2): 69–85.
- Hill, Leslie. 2012. *Maurice Blanchot and Fragmentary Writing: A Change of Epoch*. London: A & C Black.
- Holsgens, Sander. 2020. "What Is an Interruption? An Interview with Lisa Stevenson." *Supplementals, Fieldsights*, November 3.
- Mellamphy, Dan. 1998. "Fragmentality (Thinking the Fragment)." *Dalhousie French Studies*: 83–98.
- Rechtman, Richard. 2017. "From an Ethnography of the Everyday to Writing Echoes of Suffering." *Medical Anthropology Theory* 4(3): 130–42.
- Sandford, Stella. 2016. "The Dream Is a Fragment: Freud, Transdisciplinarity and Early German Romanticism." *Radical Philosophy* 198: 25–34.
- Tanehisa, Otabe. 2009. "Friedrich Schlegel and the Idea of Fragment: A Contribution to Romantic Aesthetics." *Japanese Society for Aesthetics* 13: 59–68.